

Fourth of July Extravaganza by ajwritesthings

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Summary:

It really all started at Melvald's General Store when Carol Whittaker spotted the Chief of Police buying a box of tampons.

Or,

The Wheeler family hosts their annual Fourth of July summer barbecue.

Fourth of July Extravaganza

Author's Note:

Part Eight of the Stories From Summer series!

It really all started at Melvald's General Store when Carol Whittaker spotted the Chief of Police buying a box of tampons.

She had been minding her own business, really. Silently rolling through her grocery list, thinking of all the snacks and dinners she'd make for her three boys at home, when she spotted him hustling through the front door with an unmistakably anxious look on his face.

Carol slowed her half-full cart to a stop, freezing in front of the hair dye selections and curiously observing as the Chief stumbled forward, hooded eyes wide and nervous, hand clutching at some sort of paper scrunched up in a ball.

Keeping her eyes glued to the boxes of hair dye in front of her, Carol watched out of the corner of her eye as the Chief paused with a huff in front of the feminine products, scanning the labels whilst running a shaking hand through his beard. Carol peered over carefully as he let out a dejected sigh before uncrumpling the paper in his hand and scrutinizing it with narrowed eyes, like he was trying to break some sort of tampon-related code.

As he glanced up from the paper and back to the array of boxes—slowly reaching a hand out before quickly drawing it back, seemingly unsure of himself—Carol bit her lip and attempted to connect the dots.

Jim Hopper—a man quietly famous around town for his lonely, tragic backstory—had been a mystery to the people in Hawkins since the day he moved back from Indianapolis five years ago.

Or at least a mystery to Carol and all of her new-in-town baby-group friends.

There were rumors and tons of gossip, of course, many of them even spread by Carol herself. Whispers about a divorce from his wife and the death of his child circled around, but no one seemed to be able to get a straight answer from Jim himself. When pried about his life, he seemed to respond only in grunts and short quips, not allowing anyone to get close enough to find out more.

Of course, his gruff, closed-off personality only set the gossip more alight, all the stay-at-home moms wondering what his *story* was, or how he was *doing* . They pinched their lips and sighed oh-so deeply and crooned to one another during PTA meetings about how *sad* he must be, how much suffering he must be living through, how they all really wanted to *help* but just didn't know *how*.

(Of course, it didn't hurt that Jim Hopper was the tall, handsome, broad-shouldered fixer-upper that their own husbands just *weren't* .)

For months, the Chief's arrival had been quite the topic of discussion. But, as time flew by and nothing new or exciting had happened regarding him, Jim Hopper gradually faded out of their news cycle, replaced by talk of Frank Harrison's alleged mistress and Karen Wheeler's surprise third pregnancy.

By the summer of 1985, Carol Whittaker and her gossip mill had run relatively silent on all-things-Jim-Hopper, certainly not out of disinterest, but simply out of a lack of information.

This lack of information is exactly what made Carol's run-in with the Chief all the more interesting.

Keeping her eyes trained on the hair products, but spying just out of the corner of her gaze, Carol realized that in all the years Jim had been in Hawkins, she had *never* heard of him being romantically interested in *anyone* . Flings and hookups she would hear about from time to time, sure. But nothing real, nothing juicy that she could report to her group.

Yet here he was, attempting to buy tampons in the middle of day on a Tuesday.

Tampons.

There could only be one explanation.

Maintaining her masked, seemingly indifferent composure, Carol calmly lifted her head and pushed her cart forward, readying herself and feeling the anticipatory buzz that always came upon discovering something new to gossip about with the other moms.

As she oh-so-casually pushed her cart down the aisle, Carol rehearsed what she'd say when she got close enough, fully willing to put herself out there and ask just enough questions to find out who the products were for, to find out who he was seeing.

"Jim? Jim Hopper? Oh my! I haven't seen you in ages! How are you doing tod—oh, are you buying those for someone special? Oh, wow! Who's the woman who finally stole Jim Hopper's heart? I must know, is she from around here? You know, it's so kind that you'd buy those for your special lady, my husband would never."

Quickly lifting a hand to give her blonde, stylized hair a little more volume, Carol cleared her throat and opened her mouth to launch into the investigation. But before she could do so, Jim quickly stretched a hand out and snatched a box from the top shelf before abruptly turning and rushing to the register.

Carol stopped in her tracks, brow furrowing as she watched him over the tops of the aisles, his height making it easy for her to snoop. Paying quickly—and seemingly with cash—Carol watched as Jim shoved the tampon box in a paper bag before flying out the door, hat tipped forward hiding his face. She watched him go, a million theories dashing through her mind.

"Hm," she chirped to herself, arching a perfectly manicured brow and continuing to push her cart forward.

Before she could go very far though, Carol just barely caught the glimpse of a flimsy piece of paper lying on the ground by the wheel of her cart.

Stepping forward, she bent down to pick it up, her heart beginning to race excitedly as she realized it was the paper that he must have dropped, the one he'd been studying so anxiously.

Snatching it up and unfolding it with a rush that made her feel alive, Carol read over the words, written in small cursive script.

Buy regular-box Rely, not the sport kind, normal will do just fine. I'll swing by when Will is at the Wheeler's to help out. Breathe, Hop, you can do this.

Carol's eyes narrowed in confusion. She read through the short note over and over, making sure her eyes weren't deceiving her, making sure she indeed was seeing what she thought she was seeing.

Carol gasped softly, dramatically clasping a hand over her heart.

There were a dozen Wills in town, but only one that stood out to her, only one that might be going to the Wheeler's house.

Quickly finishing up her shopping, Carol hastily paid and drove home, eager beyond belief to jump on the phone and tell her friends the news.

Jim Hopper and Joyce Byers were dating.

Twenty minutes and one rushed car ride home later, Carol was on the telephone spreading the word, her eyes alight and heart racing as she broke the news to each and every one of her old baby-group friends.

"Are you sure it's Will Byers?"

"Ask Karen if Joyce dropped Will off!"

"What does Joyce mean by *help out* ? I'm a little old fashioned, sure, but *that* is pretty bold."

"He bought her *tampons* , Beth. When was the last time Dave bought your *stuff* for you? It must be early on in the relationship."

"Why wouldn't she just buy them herself? She *works* at Melvald's!"

"Do you find it weird that they're together after her son's whole disappearing act? *I* find it weird. I wonder if that's what spurred this

on...”

“Didn’t they date in high school?”

“*Joyce Byers* , I cannot believe it!” This was Rachel Purnell, Carol’s next door neighbor and fellow board member at Hawkins Elementary School. Carol had tried to call her first, but Rachel had been rushing to take her daughters to their swim lessons, and couldn’t talk until later that evening.

“I know! I swear I was in complete shock the whole drive home!” Carol trilled eagerly, twirling the phone cord between her fingers.

Behind her, she could hear her husband desperately trying to wrangle their three boys to the dinner table. Normally, Carol would help with this frustrating task, but tonight she couldn’t. No, this was just too important.

“How can we be sure, though? I mean, they *were* just tampons.”

“Who else could *Jim Hopper* be buying tampons for, Rachel?”

“I know, I know, but still. What if it’s not Joyce and we’re all just making something out of nothing?” Rachel insisted over the poignant static of the phone. It was odd, all night long the electricity in the house had been going haywire.

Carol sighed, tapping a well-polished finger against her chin. After a moment, she gasped.

“Is Joyce going to the Wheeler’s Fourth of July party this weekend?”

It was as if Rachel knew exactly what she was getting at, without her even needing to say anything more.

“Will and Michael are still best friends, as far as Jason tells me, so the whole Byers family *should* be invited. And if Joyce is there...” Rachel trailed off, an eager twinkle to her voice.

“...Maybe Jim will be too!” Carol finished.

And within the hour, nearly every house in Hawkins was filled with

talk and gossip in anticipation of the Wheeler's annual Fourth of July barbecue.

"No."

"You didn't even hear what I was going to say!"

"I already know I'm going to say no."

"Just...just listen!"

"...Fine."

"Mike's family is having a party tomorrow, and—"

"No."

El's face twisted in frustration. Dropping her fork and throwing her hands in the air, she let out an agitated sigh and leaned back in her chair.

She and Hop sat at the dinner table, quietly munching on some sort of vegetable stir fry that Joyce had suggested. It was the end of a very hot, very difficult week, one that had taken the energy out of both of them, and even though El *really* didn't want to start an argument, she was running out of time and needed to ask before it was too late.

Closing her eyes for a moment in order to collect herself, El let her anger rush out before opening them again and shooting Hopper her most pleading, most innocent look possible, complete with huge puppy-dog eyes and a pouting lip.

(She'd learned over the past few months that he would cave more often than not to her requests if she acted sad rather than yelling and indulging in her anger.)

"You said you'd listen! Please, I've had such a...such a *hard* week," El trailed off, dragging her eyes from his and cementing them to the table with a huff of genuine embarrassment.

It wasn't a lie. She had been having a *very* hard week for a few very strange, very *new* reasons. Joyce had come to both her and Hopper's aid a few days prior, following a very severe, very intense panic attack on El's part—the biggest one she'd had in a while considering how the power to half the town had gone haywire. Joyce had come to the cabin immediately, dropping everything to be there to help. She'd sent Hopper into town in order to go get the...supplies, before sitting El down and calmly teaching her everything she'd need to know for this new... *chapter* of her life. Joyce had been extremely helpful, patiently explaining and talking El through it all without a hint of discomfort or shame, to which she was very grateful.

Following the initial freakout, Hopper seemed sympathetic of the whole thing, giving her space and making her favorite foods for dinner, but El could tell he didn't really know how to navigate this new development. He was trying though, which was nice.

Nevertheless, she decided to use his slight awkwardness in her favor.

Slowly lifting her eyes off the table, El gazed up and saw that at her comment, Hop's previously annoyed expression was now replaced with an uncomfortable tight-lipped stare. He didn't say anything more, so El took it as a sign that she could go on, sighing as she tried to remember everything she and Mike had agreed on saying.

"Mike's family is having a party tomorrow. For the...for the July... celebration," she said slowly, trying to remember what Mike had called it.

"Fourth of July?" Hopper offered up, his expression neutral.

"Yeah, that one," she nodded, still not really sure why that one particular day was so important. "He said they have a...a bar-be-que every year and that all of his parents' friends come. The ones with *kids* that go to *school* ..."

El used her words very specifically, just as she and Mike had rehearsed, hoping that Hopper would understand what she was getting at.

She paused, waiting for some sort of response or reaction, but he only

furrowed his eyebrows slightly, tightening his lips and staring down at his food in a way that El knew meant he was thinking.

“...And if I’m going to start school next month, shouldn’t I start *integrating* myself with the other families and kids in town?”

Hopper let out a bark of laughter before taking another bite.

“ *Integrating* ? Nice, did Wheeler teach you that one?” He chuckled through a mouthful of stir fry.

El’s face flushed, her ears turning pink. “Maybe...” she muttered, dropping her eyes back down to her plate as she started pushing her broccoli around nervously. “But isn’t this what you were talking about? We need a way to...to *introduce* me, a-and Mike said that lots and lots of people come to this party, so...” She trailed off, studying Hopper’s expression eagerly.

He didn’t say anything for a long while, simply staring at the table and slowly finishing his plate. El felt her racing, hopeful heart begin to bloom with disappointment as the minutes ticked on, the sigh and unsurprising ‘*no, sorry, not this time*’ surely on the tip of his tongue.

After everything that happened in November—or really after it became clear that there was no way that Mike or any her friends were going to stay away—Hopper had sat El down and talked with her about two important things: asking permission and maintaining respect. It wasn’t really new territory for them at first, as they’d talked about following the rules *a lot* before that; but the weight of that discussion had been clear after a while. For it wasn’t respect for *him* they were talking about, but for *her* .

To El’s surprise, Hopper had softly admitted that even though he knew he was only hiding her away to keep her safe, he felt like he’d transferred her from one prison to another. His words had rung out through her head, reverberating around until they clicked into place because *yes*, that’s what it had felt like all those months. Like she’d been in isolation again, locked away but this time with the TV and the Void to keep her company; like she’d been given the smallest taste of the world only to be pushed aside again, trapped in a never ending cycle of being told where she couldn’t go, or what she

couldn't do.

Together they had worked out an arrangement, a way for her to see her friends, and most importantly to see Mike. It hadn't been easy, but El had slowly wrapped her head around the idea that Hopper *did* want to let her live her own life, that he didn't want to keep her cooped up forever. That for once, the adult in control of her life was telling her what to do because he genuinely cared for her and respected her wants and needs.

Hopper's gruff voice broke her out of her thoughts. "Did Mike invite you to this thing? Or was it Mrs. Wheeler?"

El's pulse jumped excitedly, her mind zipping back to the party. "Mrs. Wheeler! S-She told Mike to invite both of us, b-but I know you're working so—"

"She's not catching on to anything is she?" Hopper asked suddenly, the ever-present tone of concern coming out. "Not recognizing you from before?"

El's shoulders slumped a bit with a mix of frustration and determination. "No, she still thinks you're trying to...to adopted me, but—"

"Just adopt, El. *Adopted* is past-tense," Hopper interrupted again. El could feel her temper flare a bit. She knew he was trying to distract her, but she was not to be deterred.

"Adopt. Fine," she huffed. "But you have to admit it's a good idea! A-And I know you're working tomorrow but it would only be for a little while! And Mike said he and the Party would make sure nothing happens and that nobody bad would be invited! A-And this way I could start *integrating* into the town before school starts, and—"

"Jesus, kid, slow down, you're gonna pop a blood vessel," Hopper said, lifting a hand, effectively cutting off El's gradual ramble. El's mouth opened and closed as she debated whether or not to go on. But before she could decide, Hopper spoke again.

"Look, kid, I agree with you, I think it's a good idea. We've been

trying to figure out a way to break the news and, well, I guess this is a good enough way to do it.”

El’s lips twitched up as he spoke, her heart racing. She wasn’t sure he would *actually* go for it, didn’t think he would say *yes* . She’d heard ‘*no!*’ so many times over the past year and a half that this was a completely welcome change.

“But...” he went on, stopping her in her tracks. Hopper sighed roughly, folding his hands together on the table and giving El the *look* . “El, it’s not that I don’t trust Wheeler or any of your...your *Party* friends, it’s just...I’m just not comfortable with you doing this without an *adult* who knows about everything, so—”

“Joyce will be there!” El interrupted, eyes wild. She’d been ready for this. “Will told me that they always go! That his mom always makes the same chopped salad every year that everyone likes!”

El watched nervously as Hopper took this in, his eyebrows pulling together and his finger thumping the wood of the table. The instant she’d said it, his brooding eyes had suddenly turned very distant and faraway, like he’d just remembered a very strange yet fond memory.

He sat back in his chair, slowly running a hand through the scruff on his chin. El watched from the edge of her seat, her feet tapping away anxiously, mimicking the way her heart beat against her ribcage.

“...Joyce’ll be there? At the Wheeler’s party?” He asked finally, cuffing the sleeves of his flannel up without making eye contact. To El’s surprise, there was some sort of soft, nervous edge to his voice, like all of a sudden he didn’t really care, or he really, *really* did; she couldn’t tell.

“...Yeah, so I won’t be alone there. She can, y’know, help with anything.”

Hopper paused, fiddling with his sleeves. El couldn’t understand why; he’d just rolled them all the way up, why was he now bringing them back down?

On a normal day, she might’ve pondered this strange reaction for a

while, churning it over in her mind, trying to figure out what it was she said, trying to understand why Hopper was so twitchy all of a sudden. El might've even called Mike over the SuperCom to ask what it meant, but she was too close to getting what she wanted to think about anything else.

The silence between them had stretched enough that El felt like she was missing something, some piece of information she ought to already know about. She worried that this might be one of those times where her question was supposed to be answered when someone *didn't* say anything.

"...so...can I go?" She asked finally, the quiet becoming unbearable.

Hopper's gaze jumped up, startled, like he'd forgotten she was there.

"Well, I mean...yeah, yeah I guess," he dropped his eyes, picking his fork back up to take another bite. "But I think maybe I should go too. Y'know, so Joyce doesn't feel like she has to be on alert all night."

El's heart flashed with excitement, a rush of exhilaration jolting through her mind, leaving her dizzy with anticipation.

"Thank you, thank you!" She squealed, jumping up from her chair and hustling over to throw her arms around Hopper's neck in an awkward half-hug. He chuckled deeply from beneath her tight hold, the hum of his laugh tickling her arms.

"Yeah, yeah..." Hop grinned as El dropped her arms and moved back to her chair, the smile still stretched across her face. "Well, if we're really gonna do this, if we're really gonna go public with everything, I should probably be the one to take the brunt of the questions. I'm sure people will have *plenty*."

He paused for a beat, and even though she was deliriously happy and distracted by her suddenly *delicious* stir fry, El could feel his eyes on her.

"Plus," he said, his tone turning warm. "I guess it's finally time I get to start bragging about my kid."

“Mike, it’s not like I’m asking you to scrub the entire room clean—although I’m *sure* it could use it—I just want you to tidy up a bit before all the guests start arriving!”

“It’s not dirty, mom! Everything has a place in there and I can’t just —”

“I’m not asking you to take down the fort or rearrange any of your game stuff, *please* just make the room look a little bit more... presentable!”

“Mom, nobody is even going to go in here! No one’s going to see it!”

“ *Michael!* ” Karen said with a tone of finality, indicating that the conversation—and any argument or negotiating—was over.

Mike groaned and slumped his shoulders as his mom stared at him over the table, her nagging and pestering pushing on his nerves, irritating his already-anxious heart. *Why* should he have to clean the basement when the actual party was being held *outside* ? His friends would be the only ones allowed to go in there, and god knows *they* wouldn’t care whether or not it was tidy.

As long as he could remember, Mike’s parents had insisted on throwing a huge barbecue party every Fourth of July. From what he found out, it really all started after Nancy was born. Her mid-June birth had been around the same time his parents moved back to Hawkins, giving them the perfect excuse to throw a big party: celebrating their first child while also meeting their new neighbors.

He didn’t mind it so much when he was younger—he and Will (and then eventually Lucas and Dustin) would always go on their own and play while their parents were occupied—but the past few years he’d been dreading it more and more. For some unspoken reason, Mike had apparently become old enough that his parents wanted him to chat and make small talk with all of *their* friends rather than hanging out with his own. For one long, excruciating summer night each year, he’d dredge through endless, boring conversations with people from his dad’s work, other moms that his own knew, and relatives he was *sure* he’d never met before but who claimed he’d ‘*grown so much!*’ .

Needless to say, their annual Fourth of July party was not something he particularly looked forward to.

But this year...this year it would be different. Or at least, he *hoped* it would be different.

If everything had gone to plan, if El had *somehow* been able to convince the Chief to let her come to the party, then today would be her first real day as a normal kid.

And Mike wanted it to be perfect.

“So, did you find out if your, uh...if your *friend* Jane could come?” Karen said, breaking the quiet that had settled between the two of them. (Nancy was out picking up Holly from a playdate, and Ted was asleep on the recliner, ‘gearing up’ for the party tonight.)

“Not yet,” Mike grumbled, a nervous edge to his deepening voice. He didn’t like the way she said *friend*, with that wavy, mom-voice that hinted and poked at El, like she was more than a friend and Mike just wasn’t saying anything. Granted, he and El *were* more than just friends, and Mike *wasn’t* saying anything. But still. He picked at his pasta with his fork, shoving it around aimlessly. “We didn’t get a chance to talk last night.”

Karen nodded with a tight-lipped smile, shooting him one those looks that made Mike think she knew more than she was letting on.

“Well I hope she can make it, she and the Chief. I’d love to get a chance to talk with him, finally ask about this sudden adoption thing.”

Mike’s foot bounced anxiously against the side of his chair, his stomach twisting uncomfortably. He didn’t like where this was going. Even though Hopper was planning on letting El start high school with them in the fall, they were still breaking the *one year* rule by a few months. And despite how badly he wanted her to be let out, to be *free*, Mike wanted El to be safe above all else.

They’d faced monsters and inter-dimensional beings in their fights over the years, but Mike knew the power of the nosy moms of the

neighborhood, and he worried that they might be the thing that ultimately took them down.

“You know, it’s so odd,” Karen went on, unaware of the tornado ripping up Mike’s mind. “I’ve never heard of him having any siblings or relatives with kids; I just, I have to *wonder* where this girl *really* came fr—”

“Can I be excused?” He asked suddenly, his fingers tightly gripping the edge of his seat. Mike was finding it completely unbearable to sit still any longer, and needed to get out.

Karen glanced up from her salad and gazed at Mike quizzically. “... Sure. Wash your plate first, please.”

Pushing his chair out and zipping over to the sink, Mike cleaned off his plate and stuck it in the dishwasher, in desperate need of some peace and quiet before the guests started arriving.

Drying his hands on a towel, Mike turned around and started towards the stairs, wanting nothing more than to slink off to his room for a bit. But before he could get very far, his mom’s voice was breaking through his thoughts once more.

“Michael, basement.”

A little over two hours (and one very rushed clean-up job on Mike’s part) later, the Wheeler backyard was filled with loud mingling and chatter and—by Will’s immediate declaration upon arriving—just the *worst* music. People from all over town were parked up and down the streets, blocking mailboxes and driveways, cramming in, trying to keep the walking distance from their cars to the house as minimal as possible.

The early-July summer heat had really set in on Hawkins, turning the air muggy and stifling, the sun shining longer and longer each day. Sweaters were abandoned in favor of t-shirts, hair was cut short for the weather, and the draw of an ice-cold beverage was irresistible. Evenings only cooled in the darker hours, the night sky bringing with

it fireflies and s'mores and a comfortable warmth.

On this particular late-afternoon, as guests filed towards the large, open backyard of the Wheeler property, the sky was illuminated by the soft, warm glow from the setting sun, gently heating the faces of everyone at the party without pushing on them too harshly.

Just like Karen had hoped.

“Oh *hi* Lisa, yes, yes you can just set that down over there!” Karen directed, a wide smile on her face as she guided the families of the neighborhood as they trickled in; platters of food in hand, looking for a place to keep them. “Fred, Lacey, I’m so glad you could come!” She grinned, ducking in for a quick hug as the couple approached her.

The party was just as exciting as previous years, much to Karen’s delight. And though she didn’t know it, there was a buzz working its way through the crowd, heads turning towards the entrance in anticipation for either Joyce Byers or Jim Hopper to arrive. Nevertheless, the atmosphere was happy, the company was warm, and there was just an overall feel of *joy* mixed with the summer heat.

She *loved* hosting parties and dinners, no matter how exhausted it made her. She loved bringing people together, loved getting to talk and have chats with those she hadn’t seen in a while, loved watching her growing kids play and mature.

Glancing over to check in on Holly, Karen could see her youngest daughter across the yard, seated at the small picnic bench with her little camp friends. They all sat smiling and happy, talking animatedly whilst coloring away at the art craft Karen had put together (once she realized how many preschoolers would be in attendance).

Ted was standing just a ways away at the barbecue, ridiculous apron strewn over his American flag patterned button-up. Even though Karen had situated the kids’ table and the barbecue at a distance so that Ted could keep an eye on Holly, she knew he wouldn’t be much help in the supervising department. Half a dozen of his work friends were crowded around him, nodding along numbly as they observed the status of the food, watching for burns, checking the heat every

few minutes, rotating hot dogs and hamburger patties routinely.

Several times, Karen had strolled by just in time to catch the back-half of conversations, ones in which Ted was going on and on with praise for how the government had handled the Russian situation, and how he had proudly *served* his country a few years back and would do it again in a heartbeat, to which Karen rolled her eyes and immediately thought, *as if he hadn't deferred from the draft during Vietnam*.

"Karen!" she heard from a voice to her right. Spinning around—careful not to spill her wine glass—Karen saw Carol Whittaker approaching, an enormous smile painted across her face.

"Carol, hi! Welcome, welcome!" She greeted warmly, closing the distance between the younger mom and pulling her in for a quick hug.

"Oh, Karen, you really outdid yourself this year! It looks incredible!" Carol chirped, adjusting the sleeve to her burgundy sweater. Karen smiled (slightly fake) and thanked her, silently agreeing because *yeah* it looked incredible.

The two of them chatted for a few minutes, talking about everything and nothing at the same time; catching up on their kids, on school, on volunteering, until Carol butted in.

"Oh, I have to ask," she said with a twinkle in her perfectly polished smile. "Are they here yet?"

Karen frowned and furrowed her brow. "Are who here yet?"

"*Joyce Byers and Jim Hopper* of course!" Carol laughed, like it was the most obvious answer in the world. When Karen just stared back, clearly unsure how to respond, Carol went on, slack jawed. "Oh, *don't* tell me no one told you?"

Karen just shook her head, taking a sip from her wine glass. She hated when the other moms of the neighborhood did that; acted like it was such a scandal to be out of the gossip loop. It wasn't *her* fault she was busy with three kids and one lazy husband. In the distance

she could hear delighted cheers from the kids' table, as they began using the coloring markers on their faces.

"Well," Carol began with an excited anticipation in her voice. And without taking a breath, she launched into the story of how she caught Jim Hopper buying *tampons* in the middle of the day just less than a week prior and how she found a note alluding that the products were for Joyce Byers.

"So *clearly* they must be, like, a *thing* now! I'm not sure what that *thing* is, but—"

"What did the note say, exactly?" Karen interrupted, a skeptical eyebrow perched.

It was like Carol had been waiting for her to ask, for in a flash, she'd dipped a hand in her pocket and pulled out a flimsy piece of paper. "Take a look for yourself!"

Karen took the small note with a hint of annoyance, slightly disappointed that Carol had actual proof of her wild story. Unfolding it carefully, she read the inscription inside.

Buy regular-box Rely, not the sport kind, normal will do just fine. I'll swing by when Will is at the Wheeler's to help out. Breathe, Hop, you can do this.

"Huh," she murmured, re-reading the note a few times over. "Well... that's Joyce's handwriting alright," Karen said, biting her cheek as she tried to connect the dots.

Ever since Will had gone missing in '83, she and Joyce had been more familiar; visiting when their kids were over, chatting honestly, without that annoying fakery that she got from the other moms. They'd gotten closer, enough so that Karen might've even considered Joyce her closest friend. There was *no way* she would've kept this a secret.

In the background, Carol was chirping on, gushing about the secrecy of the whole thing and about how Jim was going to be a step-father with any luck. That's when it clicked in Karen's head.

"I don't think the tampons were for Joyce," she said suddenly, slightly thinking out loud, slightly testing the waters to see how much Carol knew.

"What do you mean?" Carol implored, frowning.

Karen smiled, a rush of amusement filling her. *I know something you don't.*

"Oh, haven't you heard? Apparently, Jim's sister or cousin or something passed away, so he's in the process of adopting her fourteen year-old daughter."

Carol's eyes widened, her mouth dropping open.

"*What?*"

And within minutes, the Wheeler's Fourth of July party got a *lot* more exciting.

"Hey, stop fiddling with your hair, you look fine," Hopper said, locking the doors to his truck and joining El by the side of the road. Cars lined the streets half a mile back, it was lucky they got a parking spot at *all* .

"Can't help it," El mumbled quietly, pulling at one of the loose strands hanging behind her ear and twirling it between her fingers.

The heat had made her naturally curly hair even puffier than normal, and while it was longer now than it had ever been, El still hadn't quite figured out how to put it up and keep it up.

A silence stretched between them as they made their way to the Wheeler house, both of them perfectly aware of what was going to happen, of what this all meant. For while she'd been to Mike's house dozens of times, never had she walked up like this; so out and in the open, so free and *herself*.

"Nervous?" Jim finished, slowing his walk so that she could keep up with his long strides.

“Yeah, nervous...” She trailed off, biting her lip and adjusting the straps to her short yellow overalls.

El had insisted on wearing them for the party, seeing as they were some of the only real clothes that she had ever really picked out for herself. Hopper knew she would get cold (El *always* seemed to be cold) and tried to get her to wear a long-sleeve underneath, or at least bring a jacket, but she had refused, claiming that it was a *summer* party and that she wanted to dress accordingly.

“Don’t be nervous. You just go hang out with Mike and don’t get into too much trouble. I’ll take the questions.” He paused as they drew closer, the hum of dozens of voices echoing from the Wheeler’s backyard. “Just, remember the cover story in case someone asks, okay *Jane* ?”

El nodded, her lips twitching up. She reached over and grabbed onto Jim’s hand, giving it a tight squeeze before dropping it again. Hopper grinned at the gesture, and as they made their way to the back entrance, the smell of smoke and the sounds of laughter growing stronger, he was all of a sudden overcome with a strange sense of *deja vu*.

Jim had been to plenty of barbecues in his life. Some from when he was growing up, but most from his time with Diane and Sara.

He’d been different then. Hell, *everything* had been different then. He’d been a promising up-and-coming deputy in the city, he’d been a husband, a father. By all means, he’d been the goddamn *definition* of happy. Then he lost it all.

For a long time afterwards, he thought that was it, that was his one chance at family and normalcy, gone forever. And perhaps it might’ve been his only shot at having a ‘normal’ life—considering all that had transpired in the past two years. But apparently the universe had more in store for him in the family department. Barbecues, parent committees, *high school* registration; those were all things he’d lost when Sara had died.

Yet here he was, side-by-side with the most powerful fourteen year-old alive, with his *daughter* , strolling up to a Fourth of July party

with lingering thoughts of long-sleeve shirts and jackets nagging at his brain.

Weird.

Taking a deep breath—ready for the world to cave in—El and Hop walked around to the backyard, hearts racing and nerves flaring. In an attempt to immerse themselves in the crowd before anyone could notice they'd arrived, Jim led them over to the drink table and took in the scene.

He had to hand it to the Wheelers, or really probably only Karen—god knows Ted wouldn't do jack shit to help—the place looked awesome; string lights hung from the trees to the house, tables played with food were strewn across the yard. A row of small, paper American flags hung from the edge of the roof and lining the side of the fence, blowing in the warm breeze. With a sigh, Jim felt his heart quell a bit, for there was just an ambiance about the place that made him feel like he was going to have a *good time*.

“Not bad,” he said, gazing down to see El's reaction.

She was spinning slowly on the spot, taking in the lights and the faces of the people at the party. Jim was happy to see she'd stopped fiddling with her hair, but looking down he saw that instead she had opted to wring her fingers together.

“Hey, butterfingers,” he said lowly so that only she could hear. “Don't look so nervous, people at parties are happy, y'know, laid back.”

El dropped her hands defensively before shooting him a glare, her eyebrows tugged together as the crowd mulled about them. “I know what a party is,” she bit, “I've *seen* them on TV, you know.”

Jim lifted his hands in mock-apology, eyes wide and sincere. “Alright party girl,” he shrugged. “Hey, where are all your friends?”

“Jim! Hey, Hopper!” A familiar voice called from the side of the yard, near the door to the basement.

Both Hopper and El turned in the direction of the voice, completely unaware that at the call of his name, over a dozen pairs of eyes shot

towards the two of them, studying them with rapt interest. Not that they were aware of it, but all at once, Jim and El were the center of the attention, everyone who'd heard the rumor craning their necks and turning to get a glimpse at the strange girl that their brooding, closed-off Chief of Police had allegedly adopted.

Paying no mind to the change in the party's demeanor and atmosphere, Hop glanced over to see who had called for him.

Joyce stood by the side of the house, donned in a nice, short-sleeved blouse and jeans. Jim felt all the air rush out of him as he saw her; a mixture of gratitude and thankfulness (and something else he didn't want to dwell on) filling his body.

Hopper nudged El. "Shoulda known, I bet they're inside."

"For the last time, *no* !" Max insisted, lazily tossing her legs over Lucas's as they stretched out on the couch.

Dustin groaned, throwing his head back against the fabric of the beanbag. "Why not? We'll make it safe, I promise!"

"I don't care! That kinda shit just *screams* broken bones!"

"Come on! You could be *just* like Marty McFly! Will, you agree with me, right?"

Mike looked over in time to see Will's lips tighten together in trepidation. Leaning over, he stretched a hand out and gave Dustin an apologetic pat on the back. "Sorry dude, I gotta go with Max on this one. I don't care how cool it looked in the movie, hanging off the back of cars while skateboarding sounds like an accident waiting to happen."

Dustin groaned even louder and slid down to lay flat on the floor. "Man, who called the *fun police* ?" He droned, although at this point, Mike was pretty sure he was only doing it as a joke.

The five of them were hanging out in the basement, doing their absolute best to avoid people from school at the party. The air was

humid and stuffy, and Mike knew that his parents probably wouldn't be too happy to find out he was avoiding their party altogether. But they were both preoccupied with greeting and barbecuing and mindlessly talking to the *billions* of people they invited, so he figured he could get away with it.

The conversation moved slowly and listlessly, everyone jabbering on about their individual summer activities and what they did in the time they weren't together. These stories were of course interjected with Dustin routinely complaining about how *boiling hot* it was in the basement, and how they ought to go outside and get some fresh air. No one moved, though. They were all waiting for the same thing.

Lucas was talking about something else now, some sort of running move he'd learned at football camp that week. Mike tried to listen, tried to participate, really, but his heart was just not into it, his mind not really in the room at all.

El hadn't answered when he called and he had no idea if she was coming or not.

Twisting his fingers in his *Indiana Jones* t-shirt—a purchase he had made specifically to impress her after she fell in love with *Raiders of the Lost Ark* —Mike let his anxious mind run wild with reasons that she hadn't answered.

The first—and if he was honest more irrational—reason was that she was gone again. Disappeared into thin air just like before. But she told him he wouldn't lose her like before and he believed her, so that option was discarded quickly. Perhaps Hopper'd just said no, or maybe he'd even gotten mad and grounded her and had taken away her SuperCom. Maybe she forgot, maybe she didn't want to come, maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe...

"Mike! Hello, come back to earth please!" Max's voice broke him out of his thoughts. He lifted his gaze to glance over at her.

"What?" He asked, shaking his head from his daze. Lucas and Max were staring amusedly at him from their spot on the couch, Lucas's arms draped carelessly against Max's legs.

"I asked if you knew when the food was going to be ready," Lucas said, laughing.

Mike blinked and tried to get the question through to his head. Running a hand through his dark, floppy hair, he shrugged. "Oh, uh, soon. Probably soon. I don't know, I think we should wait, though, in case—"

"El!"

Mike's head swiveled around, his eyes widening at the sound of the door cracking open. A rush of cool air drifted in the room as she poked her head in. Mike didn't know if it was the breeze or simply the drop in his stomach as she came in, but goosebumps had begun to prickle on his skin despite the heat.

"Hi," she said, smiling softly, her warm eyes finding his right away.

Mike got to his feet and smoothed out his shirt, a dopey smile taking over his face as he took her in. All summer long, the heat had made her curly hair poof out despite how she tried to tame it, and tonight was no exception. Pushed back only slightly by a white headband, her hair fell to her shoulders, making Mike's heart flutter. She wore a matching white shirt with short yellow overalls and white sneakers, *the same white sneakers from before*, he realized.

"You're here," Mike breathed out, his feet moving towards her of their own accord. She smiled back at him, glowing and radiant with the sun setting through the open doorway.

"I'm *here* ," she said softly, her words more meaningful than intended. *I'm here, I'm out and free and normal* .

"You're here!" This came from Dustin, breaking both Mike and El out of their stupors. Pushing himself off the floor, he walked over and wrapped an arm around El's shoulders. "Welcome to the world El Hopper!"

She giggled softly and returned Dustin's side-hug amongst similar cheers from the rest of the Party. Mike stood stupidly staring at her, his eyes bright and happy. As Dustin released her and moved over to

hoist Will off the floor, Mike edged closer.

“Be honest,” he said, mumbling in her ear as he stood next to her, his hand slowly finding hers, their fingers intertwining. “Did Hopper *really* say yes, or did you sneak out?”

She scoffed before glancing up at him—an act that she had been forced to get used to, seeing how he seemed to grow every time she saw him.

“I didn’t sneak out, promise. I’m just really good at *persuading*,” she grinned, using the word he had taught her when they were planning how to ask Hopper.

Mike laughed and squeezed her hand softly as his grin widened.

They stood for a beat, just beaming at one another, relishing the nervous excitement that went hand-in-hand with getting to be together.

Because that’s what they were, by all means They were *together* .

“Hey, *Jane* ,” Hopper’s gruff voice suddenly said. Mike tore his eyes away and glanced at the door, where the Chief was now poking his head in. “Remember what we talked about.”

El nodded from her spot, not giving her adoptive father more than a quick glance before bringing her eyes back to Mike.

“I watched so many shows to get ready for this! I know *all* about Independence Day and—”

Before Mike could correct her pronunciation, Dustin was butting in.

“Hey!” he exclaimed, groaning and throwing his hands up as he finally got Will to his feet. “Now we can go outside! And get food!”

El glanced between her friends confusedly. “Were you all waiting for me?”

“Not officially,” Lucas groaned as he pushed Max’s legs off him and got to his feet. “But kinda.”

Mike watched as El's face flushed, her fair skin tinting slightly pink. He squeezed her hand and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Max spoke up.

"It's no problem though, we can't start the party without the whole Party, right?" She said as she happily got up and adjusted her t-shirt. Everyone nodded and grunted in agreement, and Mike was once again overcome with relief that he'd stopped being such an ass about Max being in the Party.

El turned to Mike as the rest of their friends started heading towards the door, glancing up at him. "No problem?"

It wasn't a question of definition, but of consensus. Mike smiled, checking to make sure they were alone before leaning down and quickly pressing a soft kiss on her lips. "No problem."

El could feel every single pair of eyes on her as they weaved through the crowds of the party.

She tried not to dwell on this too much, for it was exactly what she knew was going to happen. She knew that people would talk about her, knew they would look at her, knew they would try to figure out who she was. Her anonymity was gone the second they'd walked into the party, and all of a sudden...she was real.

It was what she'd dreamed about ever since her escape. But still, she didn't like how they *all* seemed to look at her relentlessly.

Together, the six of them moved as a pack, avoiding parents and fellow students and Mike's *extremely* patriotic father; expertly snatching up plates and grabbing all the food they could manage. Watermelon, salad, sodas, a dozen hot dogs and hamburgers—mainly for the boys considering how Max had revealed only hours before that she was a vegetarian—"What? I like animals.")

El stayed as close to Mike's side as she could as they ventured through the throngs of people, gripping his hand in hers and gently holding onto his arm. She'd been out in large groups before, traveling

to cities far away and into town late at night, but she felt extremely vulnerable now that she was out as herself.

Mike didn't seem to mind how she clung to him, if the way his chest puffed out was any way of knowing. No, he just pulled her closer, whispering and talking quietly in her ear about all the people at the party; who they were, how he knew them, if she'd see them more once school started.

"That's Kevin Pack," he said, subtly pointing at a small blond boy with round, funny glasses. "He was in our science class in sixth grade, he's nice, I guess. Not into all the jock stuff, even though I heard he's good at soccer."

El nodded, studying the boy's face, trying to memorize it for the future.

"And *that's* Katie McGrath," Mike pointed towards a tall, dark-haired athletic girl wearing a ponytail and holding a drink cup. "She's a cheerleader at Hawkins High and I heard she has some older boyfriend in college."

Lifting her free hand, El took a strand of hair and started twisting it nervously between her fingers.

"And that's—hey, you alright?" Mike asked, easily picking up on El's nervous habit.

El looked up at him, the honey of her eyes radiant in the last bits of summer sun. "Yeah, it's just...it's a lot to remember, and you all have such a big head start on me." She admitted softly as they broke through a patch of people, the Party only a few paces ahead.

"Hey, don't worry," Mike soothed quietly, rubbing his thumb along the back of her hand. "It is a lot to remember, but trust me, you'll pick it up *so* fast."

El nodded, her lips pursing. She did trust him, but she didn't know if she'd *ever* be able to catch up to their level.

Mike seemed to sense her trepidation, so he dropped her hand in favor of wrapping an arm around her shoulder, tugging her into his

chest. El responded instantly, curving her body into his and sliding her arm around his waist.

Leaning down to press a soft kiss against her hair, Mike softly whispered, “You’ve flipped vans and closed inter-dimensional gates; high school is going to be a *breeze* comparatively.”

El grinned, pressing tighter against him and practically buzzing at the closeness.

Ahead of them, El could see that the Party was slowly making their way back to the basement; the glow of the sun was fading quickly. They had promised to show Max *War Games* before it was time to go home.

El’s pace slowed considerably, because while she always loved hanging out and watching movies with her friends, she really just wanted to be with Mike for a while. Alone.

The eyes were on her again, adults and parents and kids subtly watching her every move.

“Mike?” She said, coming to a full stop and peering up at him with wide eyes. “Can we go somewhere...f-for us?” She hoped he knew what she was saying. The words sometimes didn’t work, and usually people had a hard time understanding her.

But Mike just beamed down at her and tightened the arm around her shoulders, warming her up.

“Man, I was hoping you’d say that.”

Whatever he had been expecting was nothing in compared to reality. Not only did *everyone* at the party already seem to know about his adoption of *Jane*, but they weren’t shy to come up and begin interrogating him.

Jim’s evening was filled with an endless stream of soccer moms, PTA moms, working moms, and even the occasional proxy dad rushing up to him to casually ask about how he’d suddenly acquired a daughter.

It was exhausting, but exactly what he expected from the nosy people of Hawkins. Jim just hoped that his answers were enough to dissuade any concern or doubt.

The only consolation to this barrage of attention was that Joyce had been by his side the whole time, jumping in and answering when he started cracking and keeping him in good spirits all evening.

They stood by the back fence now, just out of sight of the nosy crowd, sipping on some beers and tooling on Ted Wheeler.

“*God*,” Jim said laughing, “I don’t know how Mike does it. Don’t know how *Karen* does it. I mean *look* at the guy.”

Jim gestured to where Ted stood, apron only slightly covering that horrendous American flag button down. He was still grilling with his work friends despite the fact that everyone at the party had finished eating and were now moving towards the elaborate desserts table that Karen had set up.

Joyce giggled, pressing a hand against her mouth. “Man, can you imagine her back when she was Karen Johnson back in high school. Head cheerleader, student body president, going all sorts of places. Can you imagine *that* Karen with someone like him?”

Jim’s dull heart twinged as he thought back to their old school days. His and Joyce’s. Karen was a few years up on them, and if he was honest he didn’t remember her much at all. No, his high school days were filled with memories of soft lips and cut classes; cigarettes and the smell of open air.

Jim gazed over at Joyce, letting the memory of the two of them reckless at seventeen wash over him. It was odd, juxtaposed with who they were now; parents and adults compared to happy-go-lucky teens.

They never did get the timing right.

Shoving his hands in the pockets of his coat— *El really should’ve brought a jacket she’s probably freezing* —Jim tilted his head, beaming at how the light haloed around Joyce, surrounding her and

encapsulating her in warmth.

“...You remember the last party we were at together?” He said quietly, studying how her dark eyes turned to his.

The faintest hint of a smile ghosted across Joyce’s lips, her eyes twinkling as she thought back.

“Mhmm...senior barbecue, Jeff Kristinsky’s house. God, how drunk were we?” She laughed softly, taking a sip of her beer.

Hands brushing skin, lips pressing slowly, ghosts of whispers.

“So drunk...”

Jim didn’t dare to point out they’d both been sober the whole night.

A beat passed in which both of them let the nostalgia creep into them, let it surround them and pull them back; back to a time when there were no kids, no problems, no secrets to keep or worry about. For just a moment, it was just them; stupid and happy and on the verge of love.

Jim had gravitated towards her without realizing, his feet pulling him into her space. She didn’t move, didn’t push him away. No, she simply gazed up at him, dark eyes relaxed and calm. The corner of her lip twitched up as Jim moved ever closer, leaning down significantly due to their height disparity.

“...Joyce...” he whispered, the party fading away, the world fading away and filling with her and only her. “I think—”

“Here they are!”

Will’s soft call broke them out of their daze, breaking the bubble and grounding them back in reality. Jim pulled away and turned abruptly as the sounds of several teenage voices got louder, a sign they were drawing nearer. Joyce pulled away as well, a soft blush painting her skin.

Jim breathed out roughly and took a swig of his drink, cursing himself for getting to in the moment. He ran a hand through his

beard, avoiding Joyce's eyes.

Never did get the timing right.

The small group of kids ambled up, with two notable absences, dopey grins on their faces as they whispered amongst themselves.

"Hey, mom," Will pushed his way to the front, "Can we borrow your car? Or like, can you drive it? We want Max to try something."

He had no idea where their friends had gone off too, but honestly, he didn't really care. He could die right now and be happy.

Mike and El had snuck off the first chance they could get, slinking away to the large open space at the edge of the treeline, the sounds of the party fading away into a dull roar; words and conversations muffled but music still loud and clear.

He didn't know when the dancing had started, but after a while, Mike found himself holding El against his chest, swaying softly in the glow of the party, fireflies lighting up around them.

Faithfully by Journey was echoing from his backyard, where the throngs of people were beginning to thin out and head home. The night air had gotten colder, and only an hour before, Mike had to go find a jacket for El to wear, as she seemed to get unreasonably cold despite the heat. Now she stood pressed up against him, wrapped in his arms, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"You've gotten taller," she whispered in the cool air, her words loud in the relative quiet.

Mike smiled against her hair, his heart warm. "Yeah, my mom says I'm half a foot taller than last summer."

He felt El's hands tighten around his waist, her breathing matching his as she snuggled deeper into him.

"Hmm...it's nice."

They swayed softly, gentler than at the Snowball, gliding in time to the faint music. There was no pressure now, no fear or worry that their friends were watching, no secrets, no hiding. No, now in the evening heat, illuminated by fireflies, it was just them. Like it was supposed to be all along.

Mike didn't know when it happened, but he could feel the shift, he could feel how El had changed, feel how she had grown and flourished. Maybe it was during their year apart, maybe it was after her little trip to Chicago; there was no way for him to know for sure. All he did know was that she was not that small, scared girl he'd met in the woods anymore. No, this El, this strong, confident girl pressed up against him was everything he hoped she would be, everything he dreamed she would become. Unafraid, powerful, *real* .

"I'm so excited for you to be part of the world, El," he whispered softly, leaning back to look her in the eyes. She pulled back from their embrace and beamed up at him, her eyes glowing with pride and warmth.

"Yeah?"

Mike nodded, a grin slipping onto his face, his cheeks rosy from the way she was looking at him. Without missing a beat, he leaned down, softly pressing his lips against hers, body positively humming at how she immediately responded; hand slipping up his shirt to softly clasp onto his neck.

So excited.

Just a ways away, from the edge of the Wheeler fence, Hopper stood watching the interaction, biding his time, trying to give El and Mike the space they deserved.

Joyce sidled up next to him, car keys firmly in hand to prevent any of the other kids from trying to use her car for any *more* dumb ideas. She sighed as she matched his line of vision, gazing out at the two teens dancing softly and quietly.

"You have to admit, they're pretty cute," she said softly, nudging Jim a bit with her shoulder.

Jim sighed, looking down at her quietly.

“Yeah. I’ll give ‘em another minute.”

Author's Note:

find me at janes-mike.tumblr.com :)